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ABSTRACT

Hiring and retaining more women provides numerous important advantages to law enforcement agencies. Research conducted in the United States and internationally has clearly documented that following facts: (1) female officers are as competent as their male counterparts and even excel in certain areas of police performance; (2) female officers are less likely to use excessive force; (3) female officers are more likely to implement "community-oriented policing"; (4) more female officers will improve law enforcement's response to violence against women; (5) increasing the presence of female officers reduces problems of sex discrimination and harassment within a law enforcement agency; and (6) the presence of women can bring about beneficial changers in policy for all officers. Although a number of studies document police officers' and community members' concern that women are not strong enough or aggressive enough for police work, physical strength has not been shown to predict general police effectiveness or ability to handle dangerous situations successfully. Research and practical experience alike provide every reason to believe that hiring and retaining more women in law enforcement will yield benefits not only to women within the police profession but also to their male counterparts, the larger police organization, and the communities in which they serve. (86 endnotes) (MN)

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HIRING & RETAINING MORE WOMEN: THE ADVANTAGES TO LAW ENFORCEMENT AGENCIES

PREPARED BY THE NATIONAL CENTER FOR WOMEN & POLICING
A DIVISION OF THE FEMINIST MAJORITY FOUNDATION
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In 1968, the Indianapolis Police Department made history by assigning the first two female officers to patrol on an equal basis with their male colleagues.[1] Since that time, women have entered the field of law enforcement in increasing numbers and played a critical role in the development of modern policing. Yet, the number of women in law enforcement has remained small and the pace of increase slow. The most recent research shows that only 14.3% of sworn personnel are female, with an annual increase of only 0.5% over the last several years.[2] At this rate, women will not achieve parity within the police profession for at least another 70 years, and many have cautioned that time alone is not sufficient for substantially increasing their numbers.[3] Clearly, barriers continue to exist for women in the field of law enforcement, but the need for female officers has never been more critical.

Law enforcement today is facing a crisis -- a loss of public confidence and trust in the wake of police corruption scandals that are unparalleled in recent history. Highly publicized incidents of excessive force and police corruption have generated shocking headlines -- Los Angeles, New York City, Pittsburgh, Philadelphia, New Jersey, Washington DC, Seattle, Chicago, Riverside. Police brutality and corruption lawsuits are costing taxpayers millions of dollars each year, and their number and cost are only increasing.[4] With payouts increasing, it will not be long before taxpayers revolt and demand accountability by police leaders and other public officials.

At the same time, police leaders and executives are under pressure to implement community or service oriented policing, transforming the very nature of the relationship between law enforcement and the communities they serve. Nationwide, communities are demanding a shift in focus from their law enforcement agencies, toward a more modern approach that emphasizes communication and cooperation with citizens as well as informal problem solving.

So what does all of this have to do with the question of hiring and retaining more women?

Research conducted both in the United States and internationally clearly demonstrates that women officers rely on a style of policing that uses less physical force, are better at defusing and de-escalating potentially violent confrontations with citizens, and are less likely to become involved in problems with use of excessive force. Additionally, women officers often possess better communication skills than their male counterparts and are better able to facilitate the cooperation and trust required to implement a community policing model. In an era of costly litigation, hiring and retaining more women in law enforcement is therefore likely to be an effective means of addressing the problems with excessive force and citizen complaints.

As an additional benefit, female officers often respond more effectively to incidents of violence against women, a crime that represents the single largest category of calls to police departments. Increasing the representation of women on the force is also likely to address

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another costly problem for police administrators -- the pervasive problem of sex discrimination and sexual harassment -- by changing the climate of modern law enforcement agencies. Finally, the very presence of women in the field will often bring about change in policies and procedures that benefit both male and female officers.

All of these factors can work to the advantage of those within the police profession as well as the communities they serve. We therefore begin this document with the research demonstrating that female officers are equally capable as their male counterparts, and go on to discuss the unique advantages that women offer to the contemporary field of law enforcement.

Six Advantages for Law Enforcement Agencies that Hire and Retain More Women

1. *Female officers are proven to be as competent as their male counterparts*

A number of early evaluations were conducted to determine the effectiveness of male versus female officers, in law enforcement agencies such as Washington DC,[5] St. Louis,[6] New York City,[7] Denver,[8] Newton, Massachusetts,[9] Philadelphia,[10] California,[11] and Pennsylvania.[12]

- The results clearly indicated that men and women were equally capable of successful performance as patrol officers.[13]

- Similar research conducted in other countries has reached the same conclusion,[14] as do more recent efforts that find no meaningful difference between male and female officers in: their activities or productivity on patrol;[15] their commitment to law enforcement organizations;[16] their response to violent confrontations;[17] and their performance evaluations received both at the academy and on the job.[18]

In fact, some studies indicate areas of police performance in which women excel.

- In one study, female police executives were found to be more flexible, emotionally independent, self-assertive, self-confident, proactive, and creative than their male counterparts. Male police executives, on the other hand, were more authoritarian and prejudiced than the women studied.[19]

- Other research consistently demonstrates that women in law enforcement have more education than their male peers.[20]

The body of evidence thus clearly suggests that male and female police officers are equally capable to successfully meet the demands of the law enforcement profession. Of course, as one researcher observed, "not all women are able to handle all police jobs -- but neither are all men."[21] Furthermore, "in some respects at least, women are better suited for police work than men."[22]

2. ***Female officers are less likely to use excessive force.***

> "Police work used to be like a laborer's job...the only requirement was that you had to be tough. Now, that's not what we're looking for...[The job] is all about knowing how to talk to people. We screen for drug use, criminal background, but we don't do much screening for people who can get along with other people...A good cop knows how to defuse the situation by talking it out."[23]

As this quote indicates, a "good cop" uses communication skills in every aspect of the job and can often reduce the need for force by de-escalating potentially violent situations. By this criterion, women clearly make "good cops," as demonstrated in research both in the U.S. and internationally over the last 25 years.

- To date, there are a number of studies demonstrating that female officers utilize a less authoritarian style of policing that relies less on physical force -- despite similarities in activity and effectiveness.[24]

- Other recent research finds no difference in the level of force used by male verses female officers during the course of routine professional duties.[25]

Yet regardless of whether female and male officers use comparable levels of force during routine activity, it is clear that women are significantly less likely to be involved in employing both deadly force[26] and excessive force.[27]

The question of force and physical strength

Of course, the question of force lies at the heart of the traditional reluctance to hire women into policing. A number of studies document that police officers and community members are both concerned that women are not strong enough or aggressive enough for police work.[28]

- Yet physical strength has not been shown to predict either general police effectiveness[29] or the ability to successfully handle dangerous situations.[30]

- In fact, there are no documented cases of negative outcomes due to the lack of strength or aggression exhibited by a female officer.[31]

Rather, some have suggested that alternative characteristics might be preferable to physical strength, such as the ability to defuse potential violence[32] and maintain composure in situations of conflict.[33] It is therefore important to note that female officers not only exhibit more reasoned caution than their male counterparts, but also that they increase this tendency in their male partners.[34]

- Given that an estimated 80-90% of policing involves noncriminal or service functions,[35] the emphasis in traditional policing on physical strength might actually serve as a liability to police departments seeking to successfully meet the demands of their community.

- In addition, it serves to "weed out" women (and men) who could potentially implement an alternative model of policing that focuses less on physical force and more on interpersonal communication.[36]

An emphasis on communication

In contrast, a shift away from the current emphasis on physical force is likely to capitalize on the interpersonal skills that female officers possess not only in equal measure to their male counterparts, but often to a greater degree. Perhaps for this reason, at least two studies have documented a preference among community members for female officers to respond to potentially dangerous situations.[37]

- Unfortunately, these interpersonal skills have not traditionally been emphasized in selection standards and background investigations. In fact, a history of perpetrating violence has often been ignored when screening potential candidates.[38]

- In today's environment of ever-increasing litigation, law enforcement agencies cannot afford to overlook any means of reducing their risk of excessive force in favor of a more service-oriented style of policing.[39]

By hiring and retaining more women, departments can go a long way toward transforming their focus to one that emphasizes interpersonal skills and cooperation with the community.

3. *Female officers implement "community-oriented policing."*

Community policing represents a new approach to modern law enforcement, emphasizing communication and cooperation with citizens as well as informal problem solving. It is therefore important to note that women officers receive more favorable evaluations and fewer citizens complaints than their male counterparts.[40]

- To illustrate, one study found that male officers were the target of 50% more insults by citizens and almost three times as many threats or attempts at injury in comparison with their female peers.[41]

- In another, police training instructors indicated that female officers have an advantage over their male peers in several areas, including empathy toward others and interacting in a way that is not designed to "prove" something.[42]

For their part, female officers are reportedly less cynical in their view of citizens,[43] which is noteworthy because such an orientation is associated with a decreased likelihood of using both reasonable and excessive force.[44] Women in law enforcement are also less likely to be involved in misconduct,[45] and they report greater support for the principles of community policing than their male colleagues.[46] It is no wonder, then, that many have suggested hiring more female officers as a way of improving the public image of the police department.[47]

4. *More female officers will improve law enforcement's response to violence against women.*

Research indicates that 2-3 million women are physically assaulted each year in the U.S. by their male partners,[48] and that a total of 21-34% of American women are physically assaulted by a male intimate sometime during their adults lives.[49] In addition, the most recent national estimates indicate that 1 out of 6 American women will be sexually assaulted[50] and 1 out of 12

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will be stalked[51] during their lifetime. Clearly, the extent of the problem highlights the critical importance of police response to crimes of violence against women.

- The cost of failure in this particular area is high, both in human and financial terms. For example, ineffective police response has been found to deter victims of domestic violence from reporting future assaults.[52]

- Inappropriate response also adds to the risk of litigation, as departments are increasingly being held accountable for failing to properly handle domestic violence. This is especially true in cases where a protective order has been issued.[53]

- Fortunately, the benefits of success are also substantial. For example, effective police response has been found to both improve the self-esteem of battered women[54] and increase the likelihood that they will leave abusive relationships.[55]

Because the police response to crimes of violence against women is so critical, it is worth nothing that female officers have long been viewed as more effective in this area then their male counterparts.[56] This perception is shared by the community,[57] police training instructors,[58] and female officers themselves.[59] It is also supported by research.

- For example, a 1985 study found that female officers demonstrated more concern, patience, and understanding than their male colleagues when responding to calls of domestic violence.[60]

- In the same study, battered women who had contact with a female officer rated the police response as more helpful than those without such contact. They also rated the performance of female officers more favorably.

Given that domestic violence represents the single largest category of calls made to police, this ability is critically important to the success of contemporary law enforcement in responding to the needs of the community.[61]

The problem of police family violence

Of course, it is insufficient to discuss the police response to violence against women without addressing the possibility that responding officers have committed these crimes themselves.

- Domestic violence has been documented in 40% of police families,[62] and law enforcement agencies around the county are increasingly faced with the question of how to respond when these crimes are reported.[63]

- Many have noted the traditional failure of police departments to respond effectively to officer-involved domestic violence and described the grim reality thus faced by victims.[64]

To improve the situation, the International Association of Chiefs of Police recently issued a number of policy recommendations.[65] However, violence against women is vastly more likely to be committed by men rather than women,[66] so another obvious recommendation is to increase the number of female law enforcement professionals. Increasing women's numbers in the ranks of law enforcement also has the potential for lessening the chance that crimes of violence against women will be handled by an officer who has perpetrated such a crime.

5. ***Increasing the presence of female officers reduces problems of sex discrimination and harassment within a law enforcement agency.***

Study after study documents that women in law enforcement continue to face a variety of obstacles, including negative attitudes, gender discrimination, and sexual harassment.

- Research consistently demonstrates that the negative attitude of male colleagues is the single most significant problem reported by female officers.[67]

- Other work documents the widespread prevalence of gender discrimination, under-utilization of female officers, and sexual harassment.[68] For example, in multi-departmental studies as many as 63-68% of the female officers report having experienced sexual harassment.[69]

This climate of "widespread gender bias"[70] seen in contemporary police agencies has a number of deleterious effects, not the least of which is the negative impact on the retention and promotion of female officers.

- In general, women enter and remain in the policing profession for many of the same reasons that men do, including the desirable pay and benefits, the challenges associated with the job, and the opportunity to help others.[71]

- However, they often leave for reasons that are very different, including unique stresses not faced by their male counterparts. Among these are problems with co-worker gossip, training, lack of promotional opportunity, administrative policies that disadvantage female officers, and pressures to demonstrate their competence beyond what is expected by their male colleagues.[72]

- Other negative effects documented among female officers include decreased trust in their colleagues,[73] more physical consequences of stress,[74] and more indicators of burnout and greater intention to quit.[75]

- One of the most prominent impacts however, deals with the lack of promotional opportunities. Male and female officers report the same desire for promotion,[76] yet these opportunities are seen as less available to women in comparison with their male counterparts.[77] This is likely to be part of the explanation for the higher turnover rate that is consistently seen among female officers, both at the academy and on the job.[78]

Extensive research also reveals that sexual harassment is much more likely to occur in male-dominated workplaces and in fields that have been traditionally considered masculine.[79]

- Hiring and retaining more women within a law enforcement agency will obviously reduce the exposure to liability in this area by simply reducing the numeric under-representation of female officers.

- However, the increased representation of women can also have the benefit of transforming the very climate within a law enforcement agency, and reducing the prevalence of gender discrimination, under-utilization, and sexual harassment.[80]

*6. **The presence of women can bring about beneficial changes in policy for all officers.***

Lewis Sherman envisioned as early as 1973 that police departments would be held liable for their under representation of female officers, and that hiring more women would not only bring them into compliance with the U.S. Constitution but also yield improvements in the procedures for selection, recruitment, and retention of all sworn personnel.[81] As he argued:

> "If a woman 5 feet, 3 inches tall can perform the job of patrol, why not a man who is the same height? If a woman needs better physical defense training, might not also a man? If a woman defuses a violent situation without having to make an arrest, shouldn't she or any man who does the same be given a high rating for effective law enforcement performance? Departments could move toward making their selection and training standards job-related, as well as toward development of new measures of police performance."[82]

Improvements such as these would inevitably benefit both female and male employees within law enforcement. The Police Foundation similarly noted in 1974 that:

> "The introduction of women will create an incentive...to examine many management practices which are less acceptable now that they must be applied to men and women alike. This may result in the development of improved selection criteria, performance standards, and supervision for all officers."[83]

They further concluded that the expanded supply of police personnel, the reduced cost of recruiting, and better community representation were additional benefits of hiring of more female officers.[84]

CONCLUSION

Given the many difficult challenges facing modern police agencies, the advantages for hiring more women have never been more clear. However at the current rate of hiring, it is inevitable that women will remain only "tokens" within law enforcement unless traditional policies and practices are changed substantially.

The good news is that changes in policies can have a dramatic impact on the recruitment and retention of women police officers.

- For example, when the Albuquerque Police Department instituted a range of policies under the "New Workplace Project" funded by the U.S. Department of Labor, the percentage of female recruits increased from 10 to 25%, and they were retained at the same rate as their male counterparts.[85]

- Similarly, the Tucson Police Department increased their percentage of female recruits from 10 to 29% by implementing active strategies to retain women. Furthermore, clear initiatives to address sexual harassment better prepared officers to prevent or stop such behavior.[86]

Based on both research and practical experience, there is every reason to believe that such changes will yield benefits not only to women within the police profession, but also to their male counterparts, the larger police organization, and the communities in which they serve.

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The National Center for Women & Policing, a division of the Feminist Majority Foundation, is a non-profit organization working to increase the numbers of women in policing and address issues of police reform nationally. For more information, see their website at www.feminist.org.

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